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Today's FBI: Tomorrow's CIA?



Viewers may not be glued to ABC's "Today's FBI" (its ratings have sagged and its future is in doubt), but would a series about the CIA get better ratings? With at least the tacit approval of the Agency, and the active assistance of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, CBS until recently was ready to find out, moving ahead with producer Larry Thompson's show based on the exploits of the "Company." But the network shelved the project as too controversial.

Thompson first discussed his idea for a CIA program with the Agency in December 1975. In February 1976, William Colby, then CIA director, met with top executives of ABC, in-

cluding Elton Rule, president of ABC, Inc., and Fred Silverman, then president of ABC Entertainment, at the network's headquarters in New York. According to Thompson, Colby said that although he could not open CIA files for the series, he could declassify some information.

But Colby was soon replaced by George Bush, who told Thompson that intelligence agents around the world, when

informed of the proposed series, feared it would inadvertently expose their methods and operations. Lacking the CIA's cooperation, ABC withdrew from the project.

Then CBS decided to commission a script about a CIA agent who becomes involved with another agent who is running guns in Latin America. But when that script was completed in 1976, after the Senate Select Intelligence Committee had documented assassination attempts, illegal domestic spying, and other serious CIA misdeeds in its report, the network decided the story was too hot to handle.

Thompson's project languished until about two years ago, when the CIA told Thompson that although the agency couldn't be a direct participant—and open itself up to the charge that it was "feeding producers information"—it could recommend the Association of

Former Intelligence Officers, comprising many ex-CIA operatives. In June 1980, the producers signed an agreement with the association for story ideas and technical assistance.

CBS and Twentieth Century-Fox requested a pilot script. Former OSS officer and screenwriter Edward Anhalt (*Panic in the Streets, The Young Lions, Becket*) drafted a fictionalized story tentatively entitled "The CIA." The script told of a team of agents that goes to Afghanistan to learn about alleged Russian biological warfare.

Although Thompson believed that with Ronald Reagan in the White House, "the temper of the country" was ready for such a story, CBS balked again—"too sensitive." Still, a series promoting the controversial agency may yet appear on television screens. Thompson stresses, "I have every intention of resurrecting the CIA program."—John S. Friedman

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